Toward an Understanding of Mothering: A Comparison of Two Motherhood Stages

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Objective. This study sought to understand the tasks and activities involved in the caring and nurturing work of mothering, a common and important occupation for many women.

Method. In-depth, semistructured individual interviews were conducted with 40 mothers: 20 mothers of preschool-age children and 20 mothers of young adults. In addition, participants completed a questionnaire describing the tasks and activities that they currently engage in when caring for their children.

Results. The activities involved in mothering are different for the mothers at the two stages of mothering examined. The mothers of preschool-age children are very involved in caretaking tasks and meeting the basic needs of the child, whereas the mothers of young adults are involved in emotional and supportive type activities. Mothers at both stages are involved in caring and nurturing work but this work evolves and changes as children mature.

Conclusion. These findings extend our awareness of mothering and the tasks and activities involved in the occupation of mothering at both the preschool stage and young-adult stage.


Motherhood is a major life role for more than 85% of adult American women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). It is the role that women rate as being most salient in their lives (Rogers & White, 1998). Few other occupations profoundly affect so many women across all sociocultural and economic boundaries. However, the commonness of this phenomenon masks its importance and complexity. Motherhood is an intricate phenomenon. There is much more to mothering work than initially is revealed in literature or the arts and polarized in political discourse.

Llewellyn (1994) challenged us as occupational therapy practitioners and researchers to listen sensitively to the parental voice so that we may better understand the occupation of mothering. The current study sought to explore motherhood experiences through in-depth interviews of 40 women regarding their everyday activities and feelings about motherhood. The participants were in two groups—mothers of preschool-age children and mothers of young adults—to provide a means of comparison.

Literature Review

Until 20 years ago, motherhood had been marginalized as being unworthy of study, a phenomenon taken for granted because of its commonness. However, a series of social
changes shifted the research focus to parenthood and specifically to motherhood. These social changes include the second-wave feminist movement, the entry of women into the paid workforce, and a decrease in family size (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Research findings on motherhood indicate that the presence of a child decreases marital satisfaction (Ball, 1993; Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Glenn & McLanahan, 1982) and personal leisure time (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990). In addition, despite women's entry into the paid labor force, research has found that wives are responsible for doing a greater proportion of the household and childcare tasks, whereas husbands remain in the breadwinner role (Aldous, Mulligan, & Bjarnason, 1998; Hochschild, 1989).

Although this research provides important insights into how a child impacts the marital dyad during the early years of marriage, it lacks insight into the everyday experience of parenthood, specifically motherhood, because it is based on large-survey data. Moreover, this research does not provide an understanding of the individual mothering perspective. We cannot know if there is individual variation in motherhood experiences. Further, because this research was done with couples as they transitioned to parenthood, we know only about the early years of parenthood. We cannot glean an understanding of how parenthood experiences may change over time. The current study addresses these limitations through in-depth individual interviews with women at two different stages of motherhood.

More recently, the literature on motherhood has begun to explore diverse motherhood voices and perspectives (Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994; McMahon, 1995; Polakow, 1993). Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten's (1998) book explores motherhood from the perspectives of homeless mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers of children with disabilities, and teen mothers, as well as single mothers, mothers on welfare, and incarcerated mothers.

Missing from this literature, however, is an exploration of motherhood stages and parenting over the lifecourse. Rossi and Rossi (1990) noted that research on parenthood is focused at two ends of the continuum: the transition to parenthood and to providing care for elderly parents. Gross (1985) is one of the few researchers who has examined the mothering of young adults. She defined this “orbital stage” of motherhood as the time when children leave home for college, to start a career, or to find their own apartment. Typically, these children are in their late teens and early twenties. Through interviews, Gross found that these mothers had increased marital and life satisfaction compared with mothers of younger children and were more involved with their children than they had anticipated. The women found this stage of motherhood to be quite enjoyable and rewarding.

It is evident that more research is needed to explore motherhood throughout the lifecourse. The current study addresses this limitation through examining two stages of motherhood.

Defining Motherhood

Motherhood has been defined in several different ways. More than 20 years ago, it was linked directly to women’s reproductive capabilities. Although this biological construct is seen as outdated by social scientists, the biology argument is often used in political discourse. The family leave policy and adoption issues are examples of political discussion that use a biological stance.

Currently, many family researchers view motherhood as a social construct (Glenn, 1994; Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991; Thurer, 1994). Social construction refers to the process of how motherhood (and mothering) is culturally defined within social, economic, and historical contexts (Apple & Golden, 1997). Motherhood as a social construct is embedded in both micro (mother/child relationships) and macro (cultural, economic) relationships (Sommerfeld, 1989). This micro/macro view acknowledges the complex social factors that contribute to motherhood. The goal of social construction is to understand the phenomenon from the standpoint of those who live it.

Mothering is also viewed as a social construct with historical and cultural variation. It is broadly conceived as the work that women do in caring for and nurturing children (Glenn, 1994). Ruddick’s (1980; 1989) classic research on mothering within this caring and nurturing construct. She used the concept of maternal practice to describe mothering. She argued that mothers are concerned with protecting, preserving, and fostering their children's growth and development. She noted that mothering must be done within acceptable parameters of the social group (1980) because mothers are held accountable for raising their children. Mothers need to solve and negotiate these conflicting demands, and this is not always easy.

I, too, view motherhood as a social construct learned through social interactions rather than implied through biological links. I believe that motherhood is constructed within layers of micro and macro variables such as intramily dynamics, economic and social resources, ethnicity, and culture. These variables provide diversity to the role of motherhood. Women continually refine their definition of motherhood through daily interactions with others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers). This construction process is affected by the environmental and social contexts in which women live.

What does it mean to care for and nurture children? What does it mean to foster their growth? The purpose of this study is to glean an understanding of the daily tasks and activities involved in the caring and nurturing work of mothering.

Method

I used a modified grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to explore mothering. This method was consistent with a social constructivist
participants' number of children ranged from 1 to 6. The mothers of preschoolers had fewer children, a mean of 1.4, whereas the mothers of young adults had a mean of 2.4 children, reflecting current statistics for American families (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997).

The participants had many social advantages: They tended to be well educated, most had received a bachelor’s degree, and 17 had advanced degrees. Seventeen of the 20 mothers with young-adult children were employed at least part-time outside of the home, and 16 of the 20 mothers with preschool-age children also were employed outside of the home or were students.

Overall, the participants had economic and social resources that afforded them opportunities to make choices such as whether to work outside of the home. They could afford childcare and household help. They had access to good health care and could provide safe, stimulating environments for their children. They fit the image of a two-parent household.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an individual, semistructured interview with each participant. Interview questions were developed to understand the complex occupation of mothering and to discover the scope of the motherhood experience. What do mothers do every day? How does mothering change and evolve over time as children grow and mothers gain more experience? How do the women define and describe motherhood? How do women learn to mother, and what is the influence of others in that process? I wondered how the women measure the success of mothering and asked them to describe a “good mother.”

Data were also collected via a brief questionnaire given to the women before the interviews. In addition to demographic information, the questionnaire asked the participants to describe their tasks and activities in caring for their children, information sources about parenting, and how close they felt to their children. The participants returned their completed questionnaires to me at the beginning of the interview session along with written informed consent to participate in the interview and study. This enabled me to follow up their answers during the interview and to clarify or elaborate on their written answers. By completing this questionnaire before the interviews, the women could reflect on their mothering experiences.

The interviews were arranged at a location and time convenient for the participants, most often their homes. They were also conducted at my home, my office, the participant’s office, and even a restaurant. The interviews varied in length from about 50 minutes to 3 hours. Most of the interviews lasted just over an hour, but most (38) were audiotaped and then transcribed to preserve the verbatim response of the participant.

Immediately after each interview, I wrote field notes of my impressions of the interview and a description of the participant and the environment. I tried to describe the mood and the context of the interviews as well; information not captured on the transcriptions. The field notes were helpful in providing context and for reflection. They also provided yet another source of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data collection and analysis are considered a simultaneous process in the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Reflecting on collected data helps to shape and focus subsequent interviews, thus I was able to probe and validate some of the findings gained in interviews conducted early in the research process to interviews conducted later.

I used a coding strategy based on the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Chesler (1987). First, I used open coding where conceptual labels are assigned. Next, these conceptual labels were clustered together into broader categories. To test the coherence of a category, I returned to the data (transcriptions and audi-tapes) to confirm an emergent theme, ensuring that findings were grounded in the data.

A number of themes emerged from my interviews with the 40 women. These include the taboo around discussing mothering negatives, the influence of advice from others, the different view of mothering for the two groups, and the role of fathers. However, for the purpose of this article, I focus on the themes related to the nature of mothering work.

Findings

Two themes emerged from the mothers with preschool-age children: the immersion in motherhood and mothering as an enfolded activity.
Motherhood Immersion

It was evident that the 20 mothers with preschool-age children were totally immersed in motherhood. They were extremely busy meeting the myriad of demands of their young children. Although many of these women had outside occupations and interests (16 of the 20 worked at least part-time or were students), motherhood was extremely demanding of their time. They plunged into motherhood without suspecting the endless demands of young children and felt overwhelmed by the intensity of mothering. Lauren [pseudonyms are used for all participants], a mother of a 3-month-old daughter, discussed this motherhood immersion phenomenon:

The overwhelming piece is that it's constant, that it never goes away. You can't prepare yourself for that. A friend of mine is 6 months pregnant and she's like, 'this is going to be so much fun.' I think people have their fantasy of what it's going to be like, and what it's really like is different. It's really different.

Lauren described how overwhelmed she felt as a mother and noted the endless tasks that needed to be accomplished. Further, she believed that no one could be adequately prepared for the demands of motherhood.

Joanna, pregnant with her third child, described the discrepancy between motherhood's perception and reality:

In all seriousness, I look back on that time in my life, and I really think I should have gone on an antidepressant. I was really terribly depressed. It was so difficult, and I had no idea how difficult it was. You feel bad talking about how difficult it is. Instead, you talk about little angels and they do this and they do that. It's not helpful. It's hurtful for everyone to talk about positive things and the kids that aren't doing that...I mean, their parents feel bad and it's so hard. It's so hard. That physical exhaustion and the mental stresses. It's an incredibly intense time.

These two mothers were not alone in feeling overwhelmed by motherhood. Indeed, they expressed typical concerns of mothers at this stage: (a) the degree of intensity of mothering young children, and (b) the lack of preparation with the work of mothering.

Mothering young children is an intense occupation, and mothers often discuss their frustration and feelings of helplessness at not knowing what is wrong when their baby is crying. The mother has checked all the obvious sources of discomfort—wet diapers, hungry, cold, hot—to no avail. Young children are demanding and cannot communicate their needs, yet they are dependent on their parents for all their needs.

Informants spoke of the endless tasks in caring for their young children. Motherhood at the preschool stage was exhausting, overwhelming, and constant. “The 24-hour job” was a familiar refrain. The women were surrounded by mothering demands without respite. Although these women had partners and childcare resources, they felt primarily responsible for meeting the needs of their child.

When asked what was unanticipated about motherhood, the women commonly responded that they were unprepared by the intensity of mothering demands.

Kristen summed it up as follows:

I think the time. I don't know if anybody can prepare you for that. As far as how much time...just the time involved. The way I look at it is if I want to be the kind of parent that I want to be, it takes time and it takes patience. I don't think I was prepared for the intensity of my child's emotions, the intensity of my husband's emotions, and dealing with that.

Belsky (1985) referred to this unanticipated aspect of parenting as violated expectancies. Similarly, Hackel and Ruble (1992) described the tension and conflict produced when couples' expectations of parenthood are not realized. They labeled this phenomena expectancy disconfirmation and suggested that many people have unrealistic expectations of motherhood. Most of the women in the current study agreed that they had had unrealistic expectations of motherhood, but they also argued that nothing could adequately prepare a woman for the motherhood role. As Rossi (1968) observed, there is no other adult role for which we have such little training and that is so difficult to leave.

I labeled this theme motherhood immersion because this is the image portrayed by these mothers of preschool-age children. They are completely surrounded by the demands of their mother work and engrossed by it. They felt unprepared for mothering.

Enfolded Activity

Bateson (1996) argued that women's work is defined cross-culturally as all tasks that can be done while caring for a child, and she contrasted this with men's work as being “the extraordinary privilege of thinking about one thing at a time” (p. 7). She viewed mothering as an enfolded activity, one with multiple tasks requiring attention simultaneously.

This concept of enfolded activity was evident in my interviews with the mothers of preschool-age children. One spoke of playing peek-a-boo with a child while changing a diaper. Another mother described dinner as a time for caretaking, nurturing, and teaching activities. Rachel spoke of how differently she and her husband approached childcare tasks:

When I am diapering or bathing my kids, we're playing at the same time. I don't really think of it as a task; to me, it's as important [an] interaction as reading a story. When my husband is changing a diaper, he's changing a diaper. He's task oriented, he's not there to have fun but to do the task. Where [as I] for me, I am playing while doing the diapering or the bathing.

The mothers reported a lengthy list of childcare tasks including feeding (grocery shopping, meal planning, cooking, and clean-up are all inherent in the feeding task), bathing, dressing, and laundry, in addition to a multitude of household tasks. Mindy, who was in her late 20s and a mother of two children, wrote:

I am responsible for most of the caregiving of my children from the time they wake up until around 6 p.m. when my husband comes home. This includes getting them ready each day, preparing most meals, coordinating outings (parks, playgroup, moms and tots, etc.), shopping for all clothing, food, diapers, etc. When my husband is
Mindy's list of daily caretaking activities was typical of the participants with preschool-age children, and included a large amount of nurturing and teaching activities, in addition to caretaking tasks.

Participants with preschool-age children described activities such as rocking, snuggling, cuddling, holding, hugging, and singing to their children. They used words like "soothing," "comforting," "nurturing," and "encouraging" when discussing these activities. These activities were enmeshed in the daily routine of mundane tasks such as changing diapers and dressing children.

Teaching was also a major aspect of mothering for these women. In fact, the participants viewed teaching as central to their purpose as mothers. They described this purpose as "raising happy and competent young adults." They taught their children the alphabet, numbers, toilet training, words, and rules for appropriate behavior.

Cathie, a mother of a 5-month-old daughter, discussed the simple pleasure of watching her daughter master new skills and the awesome responsibility of being the teacher:

I like seeing her change. Seeing her smile for the first time was probably one of the best moments of my life. I don’t know, just the fact that everything that she's going to learn is coming from her parents initially. That's really neat to feel I can teach her and help her grow. Just being with her… someone that's with you all the time, I've never had this feeling before. Going for stroller walks brings me a lot of joy.

Mothers at this stage often combined caretaking, nurturing, and teaching activities. Cathie described going for stroller walks, watching her daughter smile, and teaching her young daughter in the same paragraph. For Cathie, these caretaking, nurturing, and teaching activities were intermingled. Lissa, a new mother of a 4-and-a-half-month-old son, also interspersed these activities in the following excerpt:

I breastfeed, dress him, change his diapers, read and sing to him, work on rolling while playing with him, rock him, play, wash his clothes and bottles, pump milk, comfort him, introduce visually stimulating toys to him, parachute activities using a blanket, take him to the doctor as needed, keep his peri area clean and dry him, give him his vitamins.

The inclusive list Lissa provided represented the comprehensiveness of mothering. Note that the teaching, nurturing, and caretaking tasks were not separate categories, but are enfolded aspects of mothering work. These mothers of preschool-age children were consummate jugglers, tying a child's shoe while singing the ABC song, and finishing with a hug. They seamlessly completed several activities as if it were one. The simplicity of these activities masks the complexity of mothering.

Young Adult Stage Mothers

The limited research on motherhood beyond children's adolescence implies that motherhood ends when children leave home, but my findings suggest that motherhood continues as children mature into young adults. Children at this stage are beginning to build separate lives from their parents. They are leaving home to attend college, start a full-time job, launch a new career, move into their own apartment, or get married. However, as children enter this young-adult stage, they still need their mothers for instrumental and emotional support. The informants spoke of the pleasure in participating in their child’s life. Janet, a mother of a 22-year-old daughter and 27-year-old son, noted:

I think this is a wonderful stage because we are healthy and active and can do things with them. They are at an age when they might want to do a lot of things with us. Once they have their own families, you become immersed in that. Not that you’re not going to see each other, but it is a nice stage now because they are sort of grown up and independent and [we] have fun together as people.

This mother viewed her time with her children as remarkable because they enjoyed each other’s company and doing activities together. She described going to cultural events with her children and getting together for lunches and weekly family dinners. She recognized that when her children married and had their own children, they would not be as available to do these types of activities, so she was truly enjoying this young-adult stage of mothering. Another mother of a 27-year-old son remarked, “This is the best part now, the payoff.”

The Invested Participant

Certainly the mothering activities that the mothers of young adults engage in had changed as their children matured, but they continued to care for and nurture their children. These mothers remained invested in their children’s lives. They provided instrumental support, emotional support, and a home base for their children. The mothers felt connected to their young-adult children and described an emerging interdependent relationship with them.

There were many examples of providing instrumental support to children. Eight out of the 20 mothers had children in college. They spoke of major financial assistance for tuition, room and board, clothing, and other items. Some also provided health and car insurance. Several bought cars for their children to use for work or at college. Another mother described buying baby items for the child of her 28-year-old daughter, who was a graduate student:

Kim and John didn’t have money for buggies and this and that, and I did. In one sense I need to be looking for retirement, but I also wanted to do that [help them]. They didn’t ask me ever for anything. It just made me happy to be able to do that, and to make all the crib bumpers and do all those things. I just wanted to.

This mother was clearly pleased that she was able to provide for her daughter, son-in-law, and new grandchild. Others described ways in which they helped their children, including providing meals and other incidentals. For many, providing instrumental support was still part of their mothering role. When I asked one mother how this stage of motherhood was different than when her children were
It’s not really any different than when they were children. It’s just that they have different needs now than as a child. I think the fact that they had to be fed and clothed and I had to do it all before, but they still have to be fed and clothed and sometimes they don’t have the money, and you still need to be there.

The mothers discussed in-depth the emotional support they provide to their young adult children. At this stage, the mothers provided an “ear for listening” and acted as “sounding boards.” One mother wrote, “listen, listen, listen” on her questionnaire in response to the tasks and activities question. Vanessa, a mother of two college-age sons, viewed her current role as a mother as “just being available, nurturing them into adulthood.” She described the activities of her role in more detail:

Hanging out if they need support and hearing where they are going. It’s important to be around to find out more stuff about what is going on with them and to show them I’m available to listen. I look at the kids that are in trouble, and I think they need someone to really believe in them, to let them know they are really cool kids.

Vanessa was not intrusive in her sons’ lives, but believed that it was important to be available, to bolster them, and to provide positive feedback. She described a busy household with her sons’ summer work schedules and informally designated family time. “It’s not like when they are little and you can talk with them at the dinner table about their day.” This mother had a career as a college professor, but she wanted to know what was going on in her sons’ lives and believed that it was important to be available when they wanted to talk.

Another mother with four young-adult children living at home also spoke of being available to listen:

I do that [listening] a lot at night. That’s hard sometimes when I’m in the midst of studying, but they want to talk. I think my youngest is real good at feelings and real good at saying what he needs, and he can solve his own problems if I keep my mouth shut long enough and let him or reflect back to him. But he gets to a place where he is OK and he leaves.

I found this availability component of mothering striking at this stage. I pictured listening as more of a component of mothering children who are elementary and middle-school age; for example, the “traditional” mother greeting the child after school with, “How was your day, dear?” But these mothers were consciously listening to their children. Many of the women talked about filling a unique niche for their children by being a sounding board, an understanding and concerned adult. In fact, the children sought their advice on everything from buying a home to handling a colicky child to dealing with a relationship gone bad.

Sociologists have noted the recent trend of adult children returning home after a divorce, while building a home, or during a cross-country move. Sometimes these children brought their spouses or their children with them.

For the most part, the informants reported being pleased to offer their children a home base. Most said that that co-residence with an adult child was fine for a limited time, but not as a permanent solution. One mother with four young-adult children at home commented that she was looking forward to her eldest child moving out because his presence was disruptive to the household.

I asked the mothers when they thought about their children. “All the time,” was the resounding answer. The following comments from three different mothers were typical:

Oh, many times during the day. I think about what they’re doing. Now that they’re grown, maybe I don’t think about them as much because I’m busy with my own activities. But I always think about them in the morning and evening; I’m anxious to hear from them if I haven’t heard. Then I give them a call.

Sometimes when I know that they have a specific thing happening on a given day, like if I know Catherine’s in the middle of a particularly important exam. On specific times like that. At other times, I think your mind just occasionally goes one way or another, and you say, “Oh, I wonder what so-and-so’s doing right now?” something sparks a thought about that.

All the time. There are pictures all over the house. I think about them every day. So I see them every day [referring to the pictures] when I get my breakfast and lunch, and I say hello to them every day. I know Caitlin [her granddaughter] thinks I’m nuts sometimes when I’m standing there talking to the pictures. But I think of them every day. I don’t know whether it’s because they were my life or what.

These mothers reported often being in contact with their children via the phone, e-mail, or visits. During one interview, the woman’s beeper went off. She checked it, smiled, and said, “Oh, that’s my daughter.” I asked if she wanted to use my phone and call her daughter. “No,” she responded. “That was our code, she beeps me once a day with 1-4-3, which means ‘I love you.’”

This connection between mothers and children also had a reciprocal quality. Not only did young adults seek out parents for instrumental and emotional support; the mothers were starting to view their children as adults. They enjoyed their children’s company, going to events together, and sharing family problems. Of her son and daughter, one mother observed, “I see them as adults and as some of my dear friends.” Another mother noted, “They talk to you on a different level—it’s a normal adult conversation.” When measuring the success of motherhood, this same mother commented, “For me, the success of being a good parent is having your children want your company.” These mothers enjoyed their children’s companionship and cherished activities together. They talked about going to movies, for walks, to meals, shopping, and even on vacations. According to these mothers, the children initiated these events as often as their mothers did. These mothers also
looked to their children for emotional support. A mother whose son was going through a divorce, and who stated that she was only comfortable sharing these family issues with her daughter, spoke of the emotional support she received from her daughter. She was truly comforted by her daughter’s support.

Sociologists Alice and Peter Rossi (1990) wrote about “help exchange” between generations. Similar to my findings, they discuss both instrumental and expressive (emotional) support exchanged between parents and children. They discovered several important findings: adult children report giving more help of a personal supportive nature whereas parents provide more instrumental support to children. Although I did not measure the amount of expressive and instrumental support exchanged between mothers and their children, it appeared that the young-adult children were providing mainly emotional support to the mothers at this stage. Young adults are just starting their careers and do not have the financial and network potential of their parents.

In addition, Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that mothers give and receive more help to children than fathers. I did not specifically ask participants about the amount of support fathers provided nor did I interview fathers. However, during the interviews, many of the mothers used the plural of “we” to indicate that both parents were involved in providing instrumental support.

The concept of “help exchange” seems sterile, somehow bound by obligation instead of by love or affection. However, the participants described more than an exchange of help. They provided support to their children not out of duty but because of their bond with their children.

I called this theme the invested participants because the mothers of young adults remained active in their children’s lives. They provided support to their children and were starting to receive support in return. They took pleasure in spending time with their children doing mutually enjoyable activities. They continued to think about their children “all the time.” Certainly the mothering has changed from earlier stages but they have not discontinued this important occupation. The mothers themselves did not seem surprised to still be actively invested in mothering. They had mothered these young adults for many years and were not going to stop being invested in their welfare.

Discussion
This study examined the occupation of mothering in two groups of mothers. The mothers of preschool-age children described the enfolded nurturing, teaching, and daily care tasks involved in mothering young children. Nurturing activities described by the participants included rocking, snuggling, and cuddling their children. Teaching was viewed as central to their purpose as mothers; they taught their children the rules for behavior, language, the ABC song, and numbers. Nurturing and teaching activities were enmeshed in the daily routine, enfolded into the mundane tasks of changing diapers and feeding children. These tasks were described not as separate entities, but as the whole of mother work. For these women, all of the tasks held importance.

The mothers of young adults were no longer involved in the daily caretaking activities of mothering. These tasks changed as their children grew and matured. Children became more independent in performing daily self-care activities, and they no longer required a mother to dress, feed, or bath them. However, the mothers of young adults continued nurturing and teaching their children and remained invested participants in their children’s lives. They provided emotional support to them and gave them advice on everything from car loans to parenting, a change in caretaking tasks that makes intuitive sense.

The important finding is that the caring, nurturing, and teaching activities continue throughout mothering stages. Mothers may not still cuddle and rock their young-adult children, but they provide “an ear to listen” and a home base. Mothers continue these activities because they are invested in their children. After caring and raising them for 20 years, they are not going to stop mothering. Although this finding is not surprising, it is notable because researchers have focused on motherhood at the two ends of the lifecourse: mothering young children and the help exchange between adult children and elderly parents. Missing in the literature is an examination of motherhood throughout the lifecourse.

Chodorow (1978) suggested that mothering is a highly emotional and deeply psychological process. Nurturing and caring become part of women’s personalities due to the identity process that girls form with their mothers. Chodorow argued that women continue to mother because they develop a relational closeness and identify with their children. Mothers and children have a strong emotional bond. Chodorow’s explanations are consistent with my findings.

Ruddick’s (1989) theories on maternal practice add an organizational framework to examine the activities involved in mothering. Ruddick used the concept of maternal practice to describe the work of mothering. “To be a mother is to be committed to meeting the demands of the child and the social world” (p.17). These demands include preservation of the child, fostering the child’s growth, and doing maternal work within the acceptable criteria of the social group. According to Ruddick, the mother is typically the person who is responsible for preserving or maintaining the life of the child and fostering physical, emotional, and intellectual growth.

Ruddick identified the preservation of the child as the first aspect of maternal practice. Both groups of mothers in my study were concerned with the protection and preservation of their children’s life and development. One mother of two young-adult sons illustrated this point: “It [mothering] really doesn’t change much, the stakes are just higher—losing a job, failing a course, losing a life in a car accident.” Mothers of young adults remained very involved in...
the doing of motherhood. Janet illustrated this point:

It's a wonderful state of being, it's a state of caring and worrying and responsibility that never leaves you for an instant, even though my children are grown-up, it stays with you. I think about them all the time, they are just a part of my being.

Consistent with Ruddick's second aspect of maternal practice—fostering the child's growth—both groups of mothers in the study viewed themselves as the caretakers and teachers of their children. The mothers of preschool children spoke of teaching their children everything from the alphabet to the values of society. The mothers of young adults spoke of being available to listen to their children. They provided emotional and instrumental support to foster their young-adult children's growth.

Ruddick (1989) asserted that mothers are held accountable for their children's growth and success. In my study, Karen discussed the bottom line of mothering: "Whether you think it is valid or not, it does reflect back to you." Right or wrong, mothers were held accountable by society and believed that they were responsible for the growth and success of their children. For mothers of preschool children, this accountability added to the intensity of being a mother. They believed that many parenting choices and interactions with their child would have dire consequences if not done correctly. This sense of responsibility and accountability was part of motherhood.

The third aspect of maternal practice described by Ruddick (1989) is the social acceptability of the mothering work. The social group demands that mothers teach and mold their children within acceptable means. According to Thurer (1994), these standards are "culture-bound, historically specific and hopelessly tied to fashion" (p. xxv). The criterion to measure successful mothering varies depending on the culture and historical time.

Ruddick's (1989) discussion of maternal practice is commonly viewed in the context of mothering younger children. However, it is notable that Ruddick's concept of maternal practice can be applied to both the preschool and young-adult stages of motherhood. The participants cared and nurtured their children from infancy through adulthood. These findings are consistent with Ruddick's philosophic stance and extend her concepts to the young-adult stage of motherhood.

In sum, Chodorow's theories (1978) on mothering were borne out in this study. Chodorow maintained that women continue to mother because of the relational closeness and identification that they have developed with their children. In addition, Ruddick's theories on maternal practice provided an organizational framework to view the mother work discussed in this study.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

I chose to narrow my sample of participants to allow for depth of inquiry, which limited the generalization of my findings to other groups of mothers. The literature suggests that there are variations in mothering based on race or ethnicity (Collins, 1991; Reynolds, 1997) and marital status (Polakow, 1993). It would be of interest to further explore motherhood through study of other groups of mothers, to examine the mothering experiences of these women and whether my findings may be applied to these other groups.

Another limitation was the inclusion of mothers with children only within two specific age ranges; thus, there is no information on the experiences of mothering children in several stages. In addition to age of children, the number of children may also influence mothering experiences. These questions should be explored in future research.

Conclusions and Implications for Occupational Therapy

There has been a trend in the occupational therapy literature to examine and develop a body of research on understanding everyday occupations (Clark, Wood, & Larson, 1998) including mothering (Dyck, 1992; Esdaile, 1994; Francis-Connolly, 1998). The research findings from this study highlight the importance of mother work at two stages. Mothering is more than just the caretaking of children; mothering encompasses nurturing and teaching activities as well. Further, the findings indicate that the work of mothering changes as children develop. Mothers of young adults no longer need to do daily self-care activities for their children but they continue to nurture and teach their children. The needs of children at these two stages are different but mothers also are different at these two stages. Motherhood does not end but continues through the mother's life.

Does occupational therapy value and recognize the mother role as work? We need to look at the nurturing and teaching aspects of mothering as important components of the role and not just the instrumental activities such as diapering and feeding. As Llewellyn (1994) suggested, we need to sensitively listen to the parental voice to understand the complexity of this occupational role. We also need to consider that mothering continues throughout women's lives and does not end when children leave home.

References


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